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FM AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9941

INFO RUEHZO/AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE

RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC

RHMFIS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YAOUNDE 000482

SIPDIS

STATE FOR USAID

COMMERCE FOR ITA KAREN BURRESS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/27/2019

TAGS: PGOV PREL KCOR CM

SUBJECT: BIYA'S SUCCESSION UNCERTAIN, SAYS SENIOR CAMEROONIAN MINISTER

REF: A. YAOUNDE

¶B. IIR 6 825 0076 09

¶C. 07 YAOUNDE 227

Classified By: Political Officer Tad Brown for Reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) Summary. Cameroon will either not have presidential elections, as scheduled, in 2011 or the elections, if they are held, will be so bad no one will believe them, according to Yaya Hamidou Marafa, Cameroon's Minister for Territorial Administration and Decentralization (MINATD). In a wide-ranging and frank discussion with the Ambassador on May 19, Marafa expressed anxiety and uncertainty about Cameroon's transition to the post-Biya era, worrying that Biya's plans to transfer power directly to a hand-picked successor will not be countenanced by the Cameroonian people. Marafa said the newly created elections commission, ELECAM, had bad leadership and was performing poorly. Marafa shared his version of the corruption scandals linked to the purchase of a Boeing aircraft (septel) and raised concerns about Cameroon's security in light of rising banditry in the north and uncertainty at the helm of Gabon and Nigeria. End summary.

ELECAM Not Working;
Elections in Doubt

¶12. (C) Marafa told the Ambassador that ELECAM does not have the "right people" for the task and is not making progress to prepare for presidential elections scheduled for ¶2011. "I am worried," he said, predicting that either the 2011 elections would have to be postponed or, if they do go ahead as scheduled, will be so bad "no one will believe them." Marafa said he would share his views with President Biya during a meeting later that week, but "he won't listen to me because he knows I have long opposed ELECAM." Marafa said the Government of Cameroon (GRC) had not registered new voters since the last presidential election in 2004, so "we do not know how to do it." Marafa said Biya would never change the people he has named to ELECAM, so Marafa's goal was to convince Biya to reshape ELECAM to make it more like the previous National Elections Observatory (ONEL), but "with more power."

Biya is "Tired" and
Not Acting Like Biya

¶13. (C) Marafa confided to the Ambassador that, until a few months ago, he was certain Biya intended to seek an additional term in 2011, but "now, I am not so certain." Marafa said Biya had been acting uncharacteristically in recent months. For example, Biya has commissioned a committee to compile records of his own accomplishments and

has, through official media, promoted the release of "Le Code Biya" a French journalist's new book about Biya's leadership.

Marafa implied that these steps suggested Biya was thinking of his legacy and perhaps preparing to step aside. (Note. In a subsequent conversation with the Ambassador during a May 20 social event he hosted, Marafa commented that Biya seemed fatigued. Marafa emphasized his own anxiety for the future, asking the Ambassador repeatedly, "what can we do?" End note.)

Uncertainty, Anxiety
For the Post Biya Era

¶14. (C) Asked by the Ambassador what the GRC can do in light of the difficulties plaguing ELECAM's preparation of elections, Marafa responded, "I don't know. I don't know how we'll get out of it." Marafa said Biya often remarked to him that the manner in which Ahidjo handed power to Biya was "the best way to transfer power in Africa," suggesting that Biya too planned to hand-pick a successor to whom he would transfer the reins of power. Biya does not realize, cautioned Marafa, that Cameroonian will not accept such an arrangement. Marafa said he was worried that Chantal Biya and "her entourage" might seek to manipulate Biya and the transfer of power to their own ends.

Food for Progress and SAIB

¶15. (U) Ambassador asked Marafa for his analysis of the factors holding up the development of a rice-husking facility

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at Lagdo in Cameroon's north, a project undertaken by the Societe Agro Industrielle de la Benoue (SAIB), of which Marafa is a financial backer, and supported by the USG's FY2004 Food for Progress program. Marafa said the lease for the land that SAIB wants to cultivate continues to be the source of wrangling within the GRC. Marafa promised to raise the issue with President Biya, but said he wants SAIB to "liquidate SAIB and pay our debts," to include the CFA 125,000,000 (about \$250,000) that is owed to the Food for Progress program.

Security Concerns and
Security Councils

¶16. (C) In response to the Ambassador's question about the status of the National Security Council that established President Biya recently established, Marafa said, "as long as (Secretary General at the Presidency Lauren) Esso is in charge, that committee will go nowhere." Marafa expressed frustration with Esso ("he is holding everything up") but blamed the system, whereby "everything passes through him" as much as Esso himself. Marafa said relations with Nigeria continue to improve since the resolution of the Bakassi dispute and worried that the GRC's recent capture, in Nigerian territory, of a self-declared Cameroonian rebel (reftel) reflected poorly on Cameroon; "it made us look like Equatorial Guinea." Marafa said Cameroonian were following reports of Gabonese President Bongo's deteriorating health and he "worried" about the effect that Bongo's death and the uncertainty related to Nigerian President Yar'adua's ill health might have on Cameroon. Marafa said he received daily reports of banditry attacks in Cameroon's north and despaired "there are so many guns coming across the border" from Chad.

Comment: We're Worried
That Marafa is Worried

¶17. (C) Marafa was markedly more anxious about Cameroon's future than fellow northerner Justice Minister Amadou Ali, who, in an earlier meeting with the Ambassador, conveyed

faith in Biya's ability to master Cameroon's uncertain political landscape (ref a). Marafa had at one time professed an ambition to succeed Biya (ref c), but in our recent conversations he has expressed fatigue and a willingness to step out of public life. Marafa complained about the difficulty he has, even as a senior minister, in getting anything done in Cameroon's difficult bureaucracy and operating environment.

¶8. (C) Marafa spoke passionately about his concerns that the 2011 elections will be poorly organized and seemed genuinely worried about the impact on Cameroon's international reputation. Coming, as they do, from the GRC official who organized the last (imperfect) elections in 2007, Marafa's concerns are especially disconcerting. Marafa never hid his opposition to the creation of ELECAM, but his criticisms seem more than just sour grapes. Cameroon's democratic institutions are weak and, even under MINATD, elections were always problematic. ELECAM starts from scratch and with tarnished credibility. With just over two years until the elections--if they occur, as scheduled, in October 2011--much remains to be done if Cameroon is to host credible elections. End comment.

GARVEY